

Too good to be true: How Argentinian audiences read Danish drama series

In Argentina, Danish television drama series such as *Borgen*, *The Killing* and *The Bridge* attract a small and dedicated niche audience that is actively on the look out for new content. A 2017 study of 83 Argentinian viewers found that these “intelligent” series featured interesting characters who were well-acted and were about topics that they could relate to. Authenticity was also important, but this was interestingly undercut by Scandinavian society being, for example, too politically correct and lacking in corruption for an Argentinian audience to consider ‘real’ per se.

2020.01.23 | YAMILA HERAM



The DR program 'The Bridge' takes its name from the Oresund Bridge stretching between Copenhagen in Denmark and Malmö. Photo: Miklos Szabo/Øresundsbron

The Argentinian television landscape

In Argentina, a country of 44 million inhabitants, the market is dominated by broadcast television, although streaming services are becoming steadily more popular. According to 2017 data from the National Survey of Cultural Consumption, television remained the most popular medium reaching 95% of the Argentinian population. However, the last decade has seen a migration of audiences towards cable television, steadily reducing the consumption of free-to-air television between 2006 and 2015. 70% of respondents claimed to watch content regularly via cable, 50% via free-to-air and 19% via YouTube and streaming platforms such as Netflix.

Argentinian television consists of private channels, state channels and non-profit channels. The national broadcast television has five channels, four of which are privately owned (Channel 13, Channel 9, TELEFE and America) and one of which is owned by the government (Public Television, or *Televisión Pública*). Public Television, which is an institutional brand, is part of the State Public Media System that integrates Argentine Radio and Television (RTA). Historically in Latin America, public media have been closely related to government interests. Among the five channels, TELEFE is the most popular having a 14% audience share. Public Television has the lowest audience shares. As a public broadcaster, Public Television's objective is to provide cultural and educational programs for the population. The positions on this are diverse. On the one hand, some commentators propose that program

quality and diversity cannot always follow the logic of audience ratings. On the other hand, others warn that public media should desist from being a “serious and boring aunt” (Rincon, 2005) and instead promote more attractive content for audiences.

Like in other global regions, on-demand television is growing in importance with Netflix being the lead player for streaming services in Latin America. In 2019, Netflix subscriptions in Argentina hit one million with an average of three users per account (so just under 7.24% of the population). In 2020, subscriptions were estimated at 40,5% in Mexico, followed by Brazil with 35.1%; and Argentina with 7.2%. Argentinians favor (Encuesta Nacional de Consumos Culturales y Entorno Digital - Audiovisual, 2013. (National Survey of Cultural Consumption and Digital Environment – Audiovisual, 2013)) news (73%), films (50%), series and fiction (43%) and sport (34%) when they watch television. On Argentinian free-to-air television, soap operas are the most popular fiction formats, many of them imported from Mexico, Brazil and Turkey.

Accessibility and audience formation

Neither the original Danish TV drama series nor their American remakes are easily accessible in Argentina. No free-to-air channel has broadcast Danish drama, and the original versions of *Borgen* (DR1, 2010-2013) and *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*, DR1, 2007-2012) were only shown on the subscription TV channels Sundance Channel (*Borgen*) and AXN (*The Killing*) between 2014 and 2015. Netflix Argentina offered the American remakes of *The Killing* and *Bron/Broen* (*The Bridge*, SVT1/DR1, 2011-2018) in their bundle (*The Killing*, AMC/Netflix, 2011-2014; *The Bridge*, FX, 2013-2014). Audiences who missed this time window had access to the series via diverse – and usually illegal – streaming or downloading websites where it is difficult to find a complete season or correct subtitles. As a consequence, Danish TV series in Argentina were watched by a small and dedicated niche audience.



Lack of police corruption made Argentinian audiences question the realism of Danish TV series such as The Killing, pictured here. Photo: © DR.DK Pressefotos

Our online survey

An explorative online study was carried out in 2017 with the aim of finding out the motivation and experiences of how Argentinian viewers engage with Danish TV drama series. The study consisted of an online survey with multiple choice and open questions sent out via Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter from November to December 2017. A total of 83 valid answers were collected. The open answers were coded and clustered into different

thematic categories. The categories capture positive aspects such as “narration”, the “Nordic image” or “becoming familiar with other lifeworlds” as well as negative aspects such as “slow narration” or “unrealistic depiction of society”.

The typical participant was female and above 35 years old, otherwise the age distribution was as follows:

- › 16-25 years old: 3%
- › 26-35 years old: 31%;
- › 35-45 years old: 27%;
- › 46-55 years old: 13%;
- › 56 or more: 26%.

There were significantly more women (79%) than men (21%) who participated and most of the participants were residents of Argentina (92%) and had a high level of education. Many of the participants were researchers and employed in academic institutions (researchers 16%, PhD fellows 14%, university employees 10%). This, as well as other characteristics of the participants, was likely to have been influenced by how the participants were recruited, namely, through a snowball system via the author’s own personal social media accounts. This being so, the profile of Argentinian viewers of Danish TV drama series set out here is not necessarily representative. The typical participants of the study are thus highly educated women who work within the education or research sector and who like internationally acclaimed high-quality drama.

Terrestrial television or streaming?

The participants of the Argentinian study watched Danish television drama series as an online activity. Most respondents used a computer or laptop to watch Danish TV series (62%), followed by a smaller number who watched them on television (33%), while 2% watched them on tablets and Smartphones. It is important to note that 81% of the participants use an online streaming service to watch series in general. The most popular online platforms to access television series are Netflix, YouTube, Torrent, Mubi, Vimeo, FOX, HBO and DirecTV.

Despite the fact that Danish TV series are not part of the Netflix Argentina bundle, the most favourite series mentioned were *The Killing*, followed by *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), *The Bridge*, *Borgen*, *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019), and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013). The participants of the survey are dedicated viewers of series who watch up to five episodes in a row. Nearly half of the participants reported binge-watching two episodes (49%) while a little over a quarter (27%) binge-watched more than two. The respondents of the study stated that they generally liked watching foreign language series with subtitles although *Borgen* was also available in a dubbed version on YouTube. In relation to genre preferences, the participants showed a high interest in television drama, especially to the crime, thriller and political drama genres. Most of the participants could not relate to scripted reality, family series, horror, or daily soaps.

Engagement in Danish drama series

The participants all like the Danish series in question: nearly all respondents evaluated the series positively. They especially liked:

- › the stories,
- › the topics covered,
- › the actors,
- › the strong female characters, and
- › the ambivalent main characters.

Not surprisingly, the female lead characters of each series were the favoured characters of respondents: Sofie Gråbøl as Inspector Sarah Lund, Sofia Helin as Saga Norén and Sidse Babbette Knudsen as Birgitte Nyborg. Their male partners and other male side characters were also appreciated by the participants of the survey. Danish series were considered as 'intelligent' (71%) and as 'featuring interesting characters' (76%). The 'good acting' (55%), the 'convincing visual aesthetic' (55%) and the 'authenticity' (53%) were also important factors for this particular audience.

Danish drama compares favorably with US drama

For many participants, the characters and the narratives are the outstanding aspects that distinguish the Danish TV drama series from mainstream (American) drama series on Argentinian television and make them "different". These aspects were particularly reflected in the responses to the open questions in the survey. For example, one participant states: "[The series have] characters that seem very real without the excesses of the Hollywood TV series". This comment emphasizes the sense of realism and authenticity that Danish television series offer their viewers.

The survey participants often compare *Borgen* to the American political drama *House of Cards*, a comparison that was also frequently remarked upon by journalists in Argentina. Both series have had great impact and a spill-over effect in the press, although *House of Cards* has had higher audience ratings in contrast to the Danish series in Argentina. For instance, the series were used by journalists to characterize the current Argentinian president Mauricio Macri and his predecessor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner: While Macri's favourite political drama was reportedly the more realistic *Borgen*, de Kirchner's favourite series was the American *House of Cards*. For example:

- › "Borgen is the preferred series of President Mauricio Macri, although many suggest that it is an election determined by his image department to contrast with the shows that the ex-president was following" (*El Día*: 14/06/2016).
- › In a radio interview, the President revealed his favorite political series, at a time when "House of Cards" was actually relevant for his marketing and popularity campaign" (What is "Borgen", Mauricio Macri's favorite series" (*Qué es "Borgen", la serie preferida de Mauricio Macri*). (*Primicias*: Guido Albamonte on 9th March 2016).

Realism viewed favorably, but Scandinavian society seen as too good to be true

Authenticity and a form of realism are other important factors for the participants of the Argentinian study. The specific Nordic aesthetics, the apparent realism of the Nordic images and the insight into other (Scandinavian) "realities" were greatly appreciated. However, participants also questioned the authenticity and realism. For example, one participant criticized the "unrealistic political correctness" which was perceived as far removed from reality: "Although these TV series want to be realistic, they are very politically correct. They don't explore social conflict". Another participant stated: "In *Borgen*, sometimes it seems that everybody is so good". A government that is not corrupt, policemen and policewomen who are always the "good guys" and a society without existential problems – all these aspects can support feelings of alienation and distance since they depict a social reality that is too far removed from Argentinian reality as to be perceived as 'realism'. Yet, this perceived lack of realism did not curtail the participants' expectations of the series who enjoy engaging in the narratives, and neither did it curtail the overall sense of authenticity that the drama series create.

Overall, the Argentinian participants surveyed relate strongly to the topics that are offered by the three Danish drama series *Borgen*, *The Killing* and *The Bridge*, and consider the series in general as authentic. They also appreciate the female lead characters and the good quality acting. The sense of realism is overridden when the depicted reality does not match their own society as, for example, the depiction of a morally upright police force in a country largely free of corruption. The depicted Danish society is sometimes regarded as 'too good to be true'. But

despite the perception of the occasional failure of verisimilitude, the participants valued and liked Danish television series and they used the series as a blueprint to negotiate their own political system and their politicians beyond the actual viewing process.

Further reading:

- › G. Richeri, G.& M.C. Lasagni, *Televisión y calidad. El debate internacional* [Television and quality. The international debate]. (Buenos Aires:La Crujía, 2006).
- › Martin Becerra, *De la concentración a la convergencia. Políticas de medios en Argentina y América Latina* [From concentration to convergence. Media policies in Argentina and Latin America]. (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2015).
- › Portales Cifuentes, *La empresa: la televisión pública en América Latina: crisis y oportunidades* [The company: public television in Latin America: crisis and opportunities]. En Rincón, Omar (comp.) *Televisión pública: del consumidor al ciudadano* [Public television: from consumer to citizen]. (Buenos Aires: La Crujía, 2005).
- › Omar Rincón, ed., *Televisión pública: del consumidor al ciudadano* [Public television: from consumer to citizen]. (Buenos Aires: La Crujía, 2005).

Links:

Examples of coverage in the Argentinian press about Danish TV drama series:

- › Javier Aguirre, *Encanto del policial nórdico* [Charm of the Nordic police]. (Buenos Aires: Página/12, 11th May 2016).
- › Luisa Corradini, *Exigencias de la moral nórdica* [Nordic moral requirements]. (Buenos Aires: Diario La Nación, 17th June 2012).
- › Nicolás Artusi, *Los suecos son diferentes* [Swedes are different]. (Buenos Aires: Diario La Nación, 12th April 2015).
- › Martín Fernández Cruz, *Cinco series que no te podés perder* [Five series that you can not miss] (Buenos Aires: Diario La Nación, 13th August 2013).
- › Hernán Ferreiro, *El boom de las ficciones que ahora vienen del frío* [The boom of fictions that now come from the cold]. (Buenos Aires: Diario La Nación, 10th May 2015).
- › Natalia Trzenko, *Un drama político endanés* [A political drama in Danish]. (Buenos Aires: Diario La Nación, 6th February 2014).

Categories: Article, Yamila Heram, Media, Research

Related content on nordics.info

Nordic Noir (06.03.2019)

Why did the world fall in love with Danish TV drama? (01.03.2019)

Popularity of Nordic noir TV series in Germany (15.02.2019)

FACEBOOK SHARE



TWITTER SHARE



LINKEDIN SHARE



SEND TO A FRIEND



More knowledge on the Nordics

Architecture and design **Belief systems** **Business** **Cooperation** **Culture** **Democracy** **Economy**

Education **Gender** **Governance** **Globalisation** **Labour markets** **Law** **Literature** **Media** **Minorities**

Multiculturalism **Nation building** **Nordic Noir** **Public policy** **Region building** **Reputation** **Research**

The Arts **The Nordics in the World**

Has this page been interesting and/or useful?